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ABSTRACT

It is safe to assume that by the end of the decade the videocassette recorder (VCR) will be the only piece of educational technology available to virtually all students both in and out of school. Given that working out the pedagogical consequences of VCR technology will be the most important media-related task of the next few years, the following predictions on the interrelated development of film technology and film study in the English language arts can be made: (1) the new video technology, because it permits and so encourages a concentration on the "micro-skills" of visual analysis, will bring the study of film and of literature closer together; (2) visual literacy and language literacy will increasingly reflect each other and so continue to provide a fruitful instructional way of moving from seeing/interpreting to learning/practicing the act of writing; (3) the microcomputer will become an intermediary between visual and written texts, and so help foster the connections between film and written language; (4) laser disk technology will, to some extent, supplant videocassette technology in the classroom; (5) the new technology will, in many manifestations, imitate its predecessors' forms, whether efficiently or not; and (6) a new kind of hybrid text written and graphic, and perhaps even spoken, may come to replace, in part, the kind of traditional expository essay now required of writing students. (NKA)

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Film Study in the English Language Arts: Technology and the Future of Pedagogy

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Film Study in the English Language Arts: Technology and the Future of Pedagogy

It should be said straight out that with the advent of the videocassette recorder the future of film in the English Language Arts is already upon us--and, indeed, one of the key pedagogical tasks of the next decade may well be discovering the most efficacious ways of employing this omnipresent piece of technology. Certainly no invention in cinematic history has so drastically changed the status of the film text, making it more accessible, familiar and controllable on one hand, and "smaller," less compelling (both visually and psychologically) and more dismissable on the other. It might even be said that films on videotape are not really "movies" at all, with all the sense of separateness in physical and psychological space that term implies, but merely an alternate form of television, one characterized by a more active selectivity on the viewer's part and a more continuous, homogeneous format (i.e., unbroken by commercials et al.). Moreover, the status of the VCR as a "school" instrument is unique: soon 50% of American homes will have a VCR, and it is safe to assume that by the end of the decade VCRs will be nearly as widespread as televisions, making the VCR the only piece of educational technology which can be used by virtually all students both in and out of school. The extent to which teachers can rely on students doing further work with visual texts at home is yet to be determined--and may well depend on some definitive

clarification of copyright laws concerning the replication and recombination of segments from videotapes--but it is clear that students will soon be able to do at least some film "reading" at home, just as they now do literary reading there.

Given that working out the pedagogical consequences of VCR technology will be the most important media-related task of the next few years, I offer below six predictions on the interrelated development of film technology and film study in the English Language Arts between now and the end of the century. These predictions work outward from the instructional centrality of the VCR in the near future to the use and pedagogical effects of allied forms of technology--for film study, like film itself, has always been highly dependent on and crucially reactive with technology.

1. THE NEW VIDEO TECHNOLOGY, BECAUSE IT PERMITS AND SO ENCOURAGES A CONCENTRATION ON THE "MICRO-SKILLS" OF VISUAL ANALYSIS, WILL BRING THE STUDY OF FILM AND OF LITERATURE CLOSER TOGETHER. Already the ability to stop and study, to rewind and review a sequence on a VCR makes viewing a film in class a more valuable, more analytic way to see a film than on a 16mm projector. Film segments can now be analyzed in all their myriad detail and not just for the overall impression they create. Mise-en-scene, foregrounding, cutting patterns, camera movements can, really for the first time, be studied by a whole class of students, and restudied

in small groups or individually. As a result, it is entirely possible that by century's end film will come to take a permanent place in the English Language Arts curriculum, much like, if not as important as, the place literature will continue to hold--for film can now be discussed and scrutinized as closely, and by some of the same critical means, as literature. Students might fairly soon, as part of their English Language Arts curriculum, be asked to explicate a passage by Chaplin or Welles or Truffaut, just as they now might be asked to explicate a poem by Wordsworth or Plath or a story by Richard Wright.

Film has, of course, its own vocabulary--and it will be incumbent on teachers to learn the basic terms in that vocabulary and to teach students to apply those terms in their analyses. Now that we have the technology to study the "syntactic" use of such basic devices as cuts, travelling shots, pans, and reverse angle shots, we need to give students the names, and so the ability to speak critically, of those devices whose basic use they already comprehend but about structure and formal operations they remain ignorant.

We might also note here that there is a growing reciprocity between film and modern literature, not only in that about half of American films are derived from some literary source or other, or even that some modern authors (like Norman Mailer) are involved in filmmaking, but also in that a number of authors--Joan Didion is a particularly striking example--have been strongly influenced <u>on a</u>

structural level by the motion picture. Film devices like jump cuts, lap dissolves, fade outs and track ins are part of contemporary "signifying practices" and are regularly approximated in much contemporary literature, particularly fiction. One could even argue that a writer like Raymond Carver, with his relentless concentration on external details and his resolute refusal of explicit psychologizing, has been strongly influenced by film, which can imply much but analyze very little about its characters' psychology. In a sense, it is not possible to know and teach a sizable portion of contemporary literature without appreciating some basic things about film.

2. VISUAL LITERACY AND LANGUAGE LITERACY WILL INCREASINGLY REFLECT EACH OTHER AND SO CONTINUE TO PROVIDE A FRUITFUL INSTRUCTIONAL WAY OF MOVING FROM SEEING/ INTERPRETING TO LEARNING/PRACTICING THE ACT OF WRITING. It is not entirely coincidental that videocassettes resemeble, in shape and heft, books, nor that, despite their sometimes sleaziness and usual tacky atmosphere, videotape rental outlets function very much like the commercial lending libraries of old. The fact is that film and literature, particularly in terms of narrativity, share a great deal. Clearly, today's students are "reading" films at the kind of rate English teachers have always wished they would read books--and while student viewing is almost always uncritical, the great consumption of films by today's (and tommorow's) students does provide an experiential basis for

understanding those key organizational patterns that film shares with written work, ranging from practical writing to literature.

Even if the study of film per se does not become a regluar part of the English Language Arts curriculum, film will very probably become a much more important adjunct in the teaching of writing. Students practicising description, for example, might look at a one-minute sequence of actions from a film, viewing it over and over, freezing it at appropriate points to check details, until they were able to write a complete prose description of all the action that takes place. Similarly, students might study a filmic passage for all those techniques (e.g., foregrounding, and bodily positioning, point-of-view shots, camera angles, cutting patterns, close-ups) which are employed to create narrative meaning, then select several of these techniques to imitate in their own narrative writing.

Such patterns as comparison-and-contrast, organization by imagistic clusters, process analysis, and localized description can be demonstrated very easily and efficiently with short segments of film, then applied to writing students are doing.[1] Because students have had so many thousands of hours experiencing (and and making meaning through) devices like crosscutting and slow travelling shots

1. Two works which give very specific information in this regard are William V. Constanzo, Double Exposure: Composing Through Writing and Film (Upper Montclair, N.J.: Boynton/Cook, 1984) and Jeffrey Spielberger, ed., Words and Images: Using Film to Teach Writing (New York: CUNY Instructional Resource Center, 1985).

over a landscape, they can immediately realize how these devices use, respectively, a comparison-and-contrast structure and incrementally descriptive pattern to communicate. From this realization, students can work to imitate such structures in their own writing, to re-create in written form the same sort of results through the same sort of forms.

3. THE MICROCOMPUTER WILL BECOME AN INTERMEDIARY BETWEEN VISUAL AND WRITTEN TEXTS, AND SO HELP FOSTER THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN FILM AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE. The microcomputer is an instrument capable of producing, with relative ease, both complex graphics and visually varied text. Already the computer, through its word processing capability, has had an significant impact on the teaching of writing, causing, among other things, a shift to a much more revision-oriented pedagogy of writing.[2] And one could even argue that writing on a computer automatically transforms "written" text into a quasi-visual object, always capable of immediate rearrangement, reordeing or other visual alterations (e.g., changing font sizes, adding italics or boldfacing). Although reading and, to some extent, writing have always been visual activities,[3] using the computer as a

2. On computers and writing see, Collette A. Daiute, "The Computer as Stylus and Audience," College Composition and Communication, 34:2 (May 1983), pp. 134-45; Brian Gallagher, Microcomputers and Word Processing Programs: An Analysis and Critique (New York: CUNY Instructional Resource Center, 1985); Charles Moran, "Word Processing and the Teaching of Writing," English Journal, 72 (March 1983), pp. 113-15; and Ronald A. Sudol, "What's New About Word Processing," ADE Bulletin, 83 (Spring 1986), pp. 43-45.

writing instrument obviously makes writing a more visual act by putting words up there on the (aptly-named) video display terminal, televising the words before printing them.

As computer-assisted instruction catches up with word processing in English Language Arts instruction, textual and graphic materials will merge more and more. Certainly, instructional programs are already moving beyond language-bound drill and practice to use graphics to highlight text in eye-catching ways--and to provide users with more effective, memorable feedback about language usage thereby. One can imagine a future program for elementary school children which teaches narrative writing by visualizing a story as children type it in. On a secondary or college level there may someday be programs which allow students to manipulate and investigate the patterns of paintings or film sequences or other visual artifacts on the computer screen, requiring them to write analytically as they proceed and then perhaps rearranging their analytic comments into a tentative essay outline.[4]

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3. As Janet Emig persuasively argues in "Hand, Eye, Brain: Some `Basics' in the Writing Process," the visual aspect of writing is an indispensable component: "During the actual writing process, the eye coordinates with hand and brain to produce the evolving piece of writing. It is through the eye that most of us gain the sense of producing an icon, the product of writing." (Research on Composing: Points of Departure, ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell [Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1978], p. 65)

4. William Costanzo, of Westchester Community College, is already working on a computer program which functions in a somewhat analgous way: it puts a series of pre-determined frames from a film (on laser disk) on a television monitor and then asks the student to answer on the computer a number of questions about each frame (type of shot, camera angle,

In any case, the more time students spend writing at the computer, and it is possible that within a decade the computer will be the major writing instrument for a majority of students, the more writing will be conceived of as a motor-visual act. Moreover, since the seeminly endless possibilities for arranging and varying text on the computer screen resemble somewhat editing of a film, there will inevitably be a carryover effect as students of the future move between writing on the computer screen and analyzing visual media like film.

4. LASER DISK TECHONOLGY WILL, TO SOME EXTENT, SUPPLANT VIDEOCASSETTE TECHNOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOM. Although laser disk players are relatively inexpensive, not much more than most VCRs, they have never become popular with the public, chiefly because they do not allow, as yet, for recording material from a television monitor. However, in an educational setting laser disk versions of films might become the more sensible way to maintain a film library. Certainly, films on disks cost little more than films on tape--and their great advantage is that they are virtually resistent to the usual kind of wear and tear that give tapes a relatively short life in many educational settings. A significant number of films are now becoming available in the cheaper, but less educationally preferable, CLV (Constant Linear Velocity) laser disk format, through which

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lighting, focal length etc.). When the student is done he/she receives a printout of all the questions and answers for each frame.

a feature-length film can be put on a single disk, but which prohibits easy accessibility of different parts of the film. If more films are produced in the CAV (Constant Angular Velocity) format--less than a dozen are now available, Citizen Kane being one of them--teachers will have virtually indestructible versions of films from which they can call up any frame, shot or sequence in a matter of seconds (since each frame is numbered and has its own groove) and freeze frames on the screen for as long as they want without doing any damage to the disk.

In addition, laser disk technology promises to be more amenable to devices which enlarge the image, to something approaching 16mm size, than videotape players. Thus, laser disk players may help restore some sense of the enveloping, oversized quality of film, that "larger than life" aspect of film that has been an important part of it since the beginning and which students need to appreciate when they consider film in a socio-historic context.

Of course, if laser disk players do eventually catch on with the public--and the industry continues to work on them despite the public's seeming disinterest--they may eventually replace videotape players in the home. If not, students may end up working with two similar but distinct pieces of technology (disk in school, tape at home) and two somewhat different sets of film texts in school and out. Within a few years it might well be possible to require students to purchase several films on tape as part of their

set of texts for a term--and require that they "read" and analyze them out of class, just as they do the books assigned. Whether the day will ever come when a teacher could require the same thing with films on laser disks is, at this moment, uncertain.

5. THE NEW TECHONOLOGY WILL, IN MANY MANIFESTATIONS, IMITATE ITS PREDECESSORS FORMS, WHETHER EFFICIENTLY OR NOT. About the print revolution of five centuries ago, Elizabeth Eisenstein has noted "that late manuscripts resembled early incunabla, that scribes and printers copied each others' products for several decades."[5] Similarly, videocassette players resemble audiocassette players in the way their controls work, and computer keyboards resemble typewriter keyboards in their layout, although one could argue that ultimate functionality is being sacrificed for familiarity in such designs. This tendency toward replication of forms will probably have certain negative consequences for media technology in the classroom. For instance, both videotape and laser disks will probably still have be played in machines attached to conventional television sets, rather than in machines (admittedly more expensive and more limited) with self-contained projection units which could provide larger, clearer, better-colored pictures. And, unfortunately, films will probably continue to be colorized, to make them resemble the contemporary television shows with

5. "Some Conjectures about the Impact of Printing on Western Society and Thought: A Preliminary Report," Journal of Modern History, 4:1 (March 1968), p. 3.

which they must compete. (Perhaps the best we can hope for is that the black-and-white versions of some classic films will remain available.) On the positive side, there will probably be the invention of some useful pieces of accessory technology. One could imagine coin-operated photocopy machines, like those presently attached to some microfilm readers, which could produce a photocopy of whatever film frame is frozen on the screen, surely a help for students writing and illustrating paper on film and film-related topics. There might even be, if copyright laws for institutional use are ever fully clarified, educational tape copy machines which could copy a 2-3 minutes sequence from a master tape onto twenty or thirty student disks at the same time.

6. A NEW KIND OF HYBRID TEXT, WRITTEN AND GRAPHIC AND PERHAPS EVEN SPOKEN, MAY COME TO REPLACE, IN PART, THE KIND OF TRADITIONAL EXPOSITORY ESSAY WE NOW REQUIRE OF WRITING STUDENTS. In the opinion of one well-respected writer on English Language Arts, "the true power of the videodisc should emerge through as-yet-undeveloped interactive programs that combine print, image and sound..."[6] If such programs are developed to the point where they allow the user sufficient control to produce what is essentially his or her own text, English Language Arts teachers may well have to become knowledgeable enough about these multi-media

6. Charles Suhor, "Books and the New Technologies," Consensus and Dissent: Teaching English Past, Present, and Future, ed. Marjorie N. Farmer (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1986), p. 106.

texts to teach, assign and evaluate them. Certainly, one can imagine such texts fulfilling many communicative roles. For instance, on a personal level these texts might become an intermediate form between the letter and the telephone conversation, while in business they might combine the best of the traditional written report and the live presentation. Undoubtedly, film and video and television would, in some form, play a significant (and intriguing) rhetorical role in contributing their matter and influence to these mixed forms.[7]

Some day not too far off English teachers may be writing comments like "I think your piece needs more texto-graphic unity, perhaps through some machine-spoken commentary" or "Splendid, effective use of color" or, more specifically, "The image cluster on Screen 14 would seem to contradict as much as support your preceding assertion" or "Do you really think Pica 12 combines well with Computer Voice 6 to create the kind of impression you want here?" Of course, by then the designation of "English teacher" will be an anachronism, for it would not exactly be English but some

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7. Another invention that is likely to add further to this mixture of written and other communicative forms is the voice-synthesized word processor, which may be only a few years away as a practical alternative for the microcomputer "writer." It will be interesting to see how written language will inevitably take on more of the characteristics of spoken language as users learn to speak their written text into the machine, even as spoken language might be pushed toward more formality and less ellipsis because people are used to having their spoken words put into the slightly more formal and decided more complete form of written language.

newer, in many cases more effective, form of communication we would be teaching.

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